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Hard Work Under Pressure

*With Success In the Classroom and on the Field, Tommy Pluschkell Defines the Cal Poly Student-Athlete*

By Larry Peña

Meeting Tommy Pluschkell, it’s easy to believe in the fantasy of the guy who has it all. This spring, the Mustang baseball first-baseman and engineering major was named Cal Poly’s 2012 Big West Male Scholar-Athlete of the Year in recognition of his outstanding achievements both on the field and in the classroom.

He’s a starter as a sophomore and has been on the Dean’s List seven of his eight quarters at Cal Poly. His success might be alienating, if it wasn’t so clearly the result of hard work, a great attitude, and an incredible sense of discipline.

“I’ve always had to work hard,” he said.

“Baseball has never really come that easy to me. But it’s definitely my passion, so I don’t really see it as putting in a lot of hard work.”

Pluschkell is, according to his coach, “the type of player who makes everyone around him better.”

“He works hard to make the most of his abilities,” head baseball coach Larry Lee said. “He comes to practice every day and works to get better, whether it’s on the field or in the weight room.”

That all sounds great on paper, and actually discovering what it takes to maintain high performance at both sports and school inspires an even higher new level of respect for this 21-year-old. In addition to a full-time academic load, Plushckell and his teammates endure a staggering commitment of time and effort that exceeds 25 hours a week, plus individual daily workouts to stay conditioned. He said that between time in the field, team warmups, and his own personal preparation routine, he has spent as many as nine straight hours on the field on game days.

Pluschkell said that the pressure of the demanding schedule actually enhances his performance in the classroom. “It really forces us to stay disciplined and to stay focused, so when you’re not at practice you’re getting your homework done whenever you have that opportunity,” he said. “You really learn, not so much to cram, but to prioritize and make time whenever you have it, for being productive.”



Pluschkell on the field (Photo courtesy Cal Poly Athletics)



Cal Poly Mustangs baseball player and engineering student Tommy Pluschkell, in the Engineering Plaza on campus. (Photo by Brittany App)

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Professors have noted that what makes Pluschkell stand out as a student is his ability to thrive under that kind of pressure. “He wasn’t just good, he was right at the top of his class,” said John Larson, a lecturer in the mechanical engineering program who has taught two of Pluschkell’s classes. “I understand how hard it is for these guys — they have to be really sharp and very organized to balance an intercollegiate sport and a tough academic major. Tommy is a very rare bird! Give some credit to his parents — they did a great job raising their son.”

It was his parents, Pluschkell said, who inspired his remarkable level of drive. As a boy he watched his father, a systems engineer, launch several successful business ventures, absorbing a lesson from the focus and determination that experience required. Both parents set the bar high for him and his siblings.

“They would always make sure we were on top of our schoolwork and our grades,” he said. “We always understood that was what we were supposed to do.”

Structural engineering professor Garrett Hall sees a connection between hard work on the field and hard work in the classroom.

“I told Tommy one time that I wish all the students in my classes had played baseball at some point in their life for a simple reason ♦ baseball teaches mental toughness,” he said. “He seems to apply the lessons of baseball to academics: stay mentally tough, keep working hard, don’t make excuses, and continually look for ways to get better.”

Pluschkell plans to take on a concentration in mechanical engineering and eventually follow in his father’s footsteps. “I’ve always liked his career and admired that,” he said. “That’s where my goals are, to start small with an engineering firm and build my way up to opening my own company one day.”

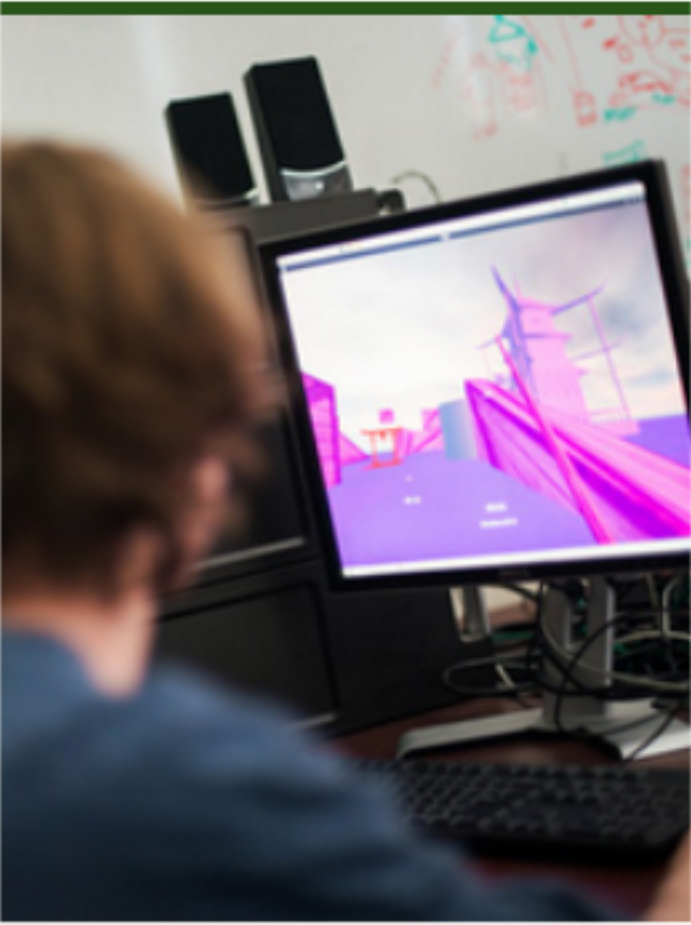
Even as he dreams of the future, he acknowledges that great success means discipline, determination, and a lot of hard work.



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